

Longtime Chandler Recreation Volunteer Reflects on Hershey Track History

by Ken Sipes and Liam O'Mahony, City of Chandler Recreation Division

This summer, the City of Chandler Recreation bade a fond farewell to one of its longest-tenured volunteers, who contributed greatly to the success of the annual Hershey Track & Field Meet for 30 years. As Sue Vant Hof, a physical education teacher with the Chandler Unified School District since 1976, embarked on her retirement in June, she took some time to look back on her memorable experiences working with the Chandler Recreation staff.

Running has always been a part of Vant Hof's life, dating back to her high school days in Oakland, California, where she ran track with well-known actor Tom Hanks, who gave a great cinematic performance in which others beckoned, "Run, Forrest, run!"

An Arizona State University alum, Vant Hof has taught physical education at five different Chandler elementary schools, four of which she was part of opening, providing scores of local students with her expertise on fitness and athletics. Throughout her teaching career, Vant Hof has always been an enthusiastic and reliable partner of the City of Chandler Recreation Division, lending her time, knowledge and recruitment efforts to other special events such as the Punt, Pass & Kick competition and 5K Fun Runs for residents. This longtime, valued, mutually beneficial partnership with Chandler Recreation began with a simple flier that was posted in the hallway of her school.

"In 1980, I saw a flier posted on the school bulletin board advertising the upcoming Jesse Owens Track Meet [in 1983, the Hershey Company took over as funding sponsor, and the program's national competition was moved to Hershey, Pennsylvania] that was sponsored by the city of Chandler," Vant Hof said. "I immediately volunteered for the event because it was something that was not offered when I was growing up, so I wanted to be part of it and help it grow." That first year, she rallied together 36 students from Frye Elementary School, and they walked as a group from Frye to Austin Field at Chandler High School to participate in the track meet. Frye won the all-around meet championship and walked back carrying the trophy.

Her favorite memory came when she was at Sanborn Elementary in 1993. She had just left Humphrey Elementary after winning the city track championship for seven consecutive years. She remembers that the students at Sanborn were not familiar with track and field and had little experience to speak of for these competitive activities. Since Humphrey Elementary had won the championship for many years, she felt that Sanborn didn't have a chance in the meet. The track meet came down to the final race in the girls' 200-meter race, and Sanborn Elementary won the race to take the championship. She felt that this particular year was

"sweet," and winning the championship was "unexpected" because the students had lacked meaningful track experience entering the event and were matched up against a school that was more established.

"Mrs. Vant Hof was an inspiration and always had a positive attitude in helping me when I participated in the softball throw at the Hershey Nationals in 2002 and 2004," said MacKenzie Handel, a former student of hers at Sanborn Elementary who recently graduated from Chandler High School. "She guided me through the process of advancing from the local meet to districts, then on to the state and national levels. She was always very committed to keeping her students active in some kind of athletic activity."

Vant Hof experienced some challenges in maintaining the participation levels of the Hershey Track Meet in recent years. "It became harder to recruit participants over the years because there was so much competition from other sports offered to youth today. So many children are involved in more year-round club teams now," she said.

She offers this advice to aspiring teachers and coaches: "Every child has a gift, and it's your job to find it by continually providing compliments and being specific with your praise. Be honest and fair with every child, because they can tell when you're not. It is important to set guidelines and expectations for students to provide structure with boundaries while you consistently push them to their goals."

Vant Hof is proud to have coached 11 Chandler students who advanced to the Hershey National Meet, and she recalled a banner year in 1995 when she sent a record 273 students to the local Chandler competition. Her excellence with students was recognized when she received the Physical Education Teacher of the Year award in 1994. She also worked with some noteworthy student-athletes, ranging from the nephew of former NBA guard and Boston Celtics General Manager Danny Ainge to Major League Baseball player Cody Ransom to former NFL safety Adam Archuleta. Ransom and Archuleta were inducted into the Chandler Sports Hall of Fame in December 2009.

Now that she has retired, Vant Hof says she will remain active in running clubs, jump-rope instruction and other health and wellness fundraising events in the Southeast Valley. As she hangs up her whistle and clipboard and walks away from a storied career in the gymnasiums and at the tracks of Chandler, she will still be found around local athletic competitions as a participant, an observer, a fan, a friend or a volunteer.

As a lifelong educator and fitness advocate for children, Vant Hof will be missed by the Chandler Unified School District and the City of Chandler Recreation Division for her contributions to making healthier, active students for more than three decades. As she has often said to her students, "Participation is victory," and "The finish line is only the beginning." Her retirement marks a distinguished record of participation, leadership and mentoring, and her finish line now represents the start of new adventures in her life.